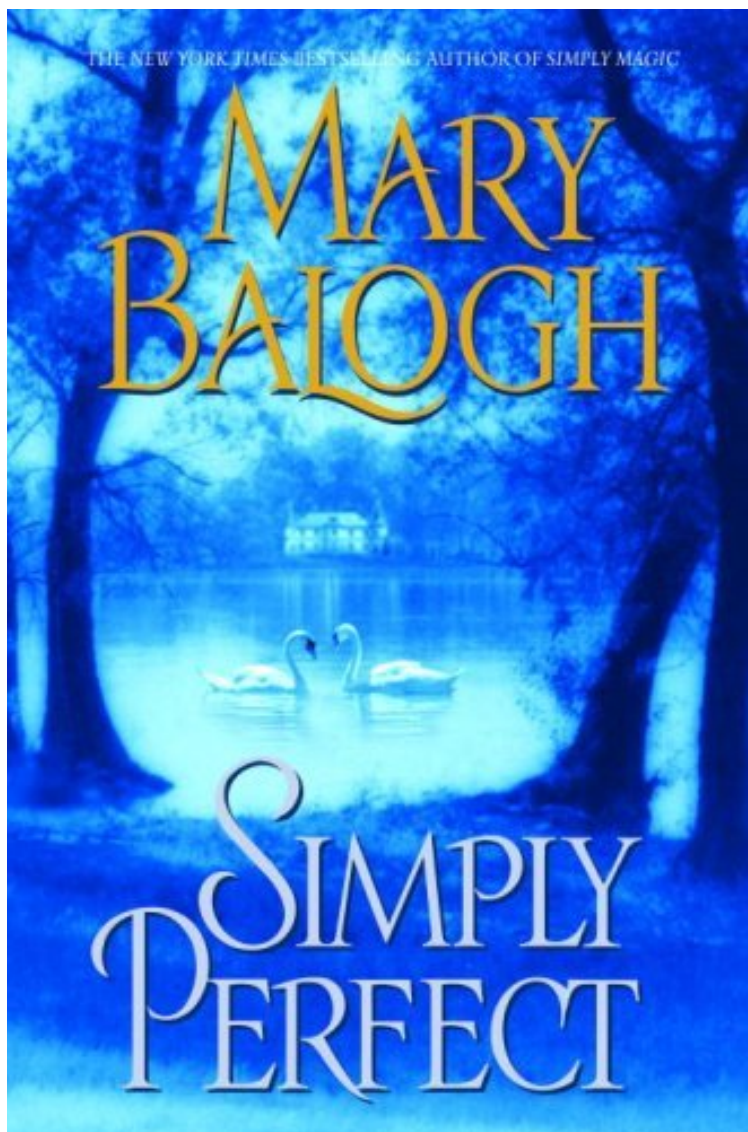


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# Simply Perfect



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's The Secret Mistress.Set against the seductive backdrop of Regency England, New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh's latest novel sweeps us into the sensual, enthralling world of an elite academy for young ladies. Here, amid music lessons and garden parties, whispered confessions and secret yearnings, one of the schools teachersheadmistress Claudia Martinwill find her well-ordered world jolted by love when she meets a man who would make the perfect husbandfor somebody else.Tall, dark, and exquisitely sensual, he is the epitome of male perfection. Not that Claudia Martin is looking for a lover. Or a husband. As owner and headmistress of Miss Martins School for Girls in Bath, she long ago resigned herself to a life without love. Until Joseph, Marquess of Attingsborough, arrives unannounced and tempts her to toss away a lifetime of propriety for an

affair that can only lead to ruin. Joseph has his own reasons for seeking Claudia out. Instantly, irresistibly attracted to the dedicated teacher, he embarks on a plan of seduction that leaves them both yearning for more. But as heir to a prestigious dukedom, Joseph is expected to carry on his family's legacy. And Claudia knows she has no place in his world. Now that world is about to be rocked by scandal. An arranged marriage, a secret that will shock the ton, and a man from Claudia's past conspire to drive the lovers apart. But Joseph is determined to make Claudia his at any cost. Even if that means defying convention and breaking every rule for a love that is everything he has ever wanted—a love that is perfection itself.

Extrait Chapter One Claudia Martin had already had a hard day at school. First Mademoiselle Pierre, one of the nonresident teachers, had sent a messenger just before breakfast with the news that she was indisposed with a migraine headache and would be unable to come to school, and Claudia, as both owner and headmistress, had been obliged to conduct most of the French and music classes in addition to her own subjects. French was no great problem; music was more of a challenge. Worse, the account books, which she had intended to bring up to date during her spare classes today, remained undone, with days fast running out in which to get accomplished all the myriad tasks that needed doing. Then just before the noonday meal, when classes were over for the morning and discipline was at its slackest, Paula Hern had decided that she objected to the way Molly Wiggins looked at her and voiced her displeasure publicly and eloquently. And since Paula's father was a successful businessman and as rich as Croesus and she put on airs accordingly while Molly was the youngest and most timid of the charity girls and did not even know who her father was, then of course Agnes Ryde had felt obliged to jump into the fray in vigorous defense of the downtrodden, her Cockney accent returning with ear-jarring clarity. Claudia had been forced to deal with the matter and extract more-or-less sincere apologies from all sides and mete out suitable punishments to all except the more-or-less innocent Molly. Then, an hour later, just when Miss Walton had been about to step outdoors with the junior class en route to Bath Abbey, where she had intended to give an informal lesson in art and architecture, the heavens had opened in a downpour to end downpours and there had been all the fuss of finding the girls somewhere else to go within the school and something else to do. Not that that had been Claudia's problem, but she had been made annoyingly aware of the girls' loud disappointment beyond her classroom door as she struggled to teach French irregular verbs. She had finally gone out there to inform them that if they had any complaint about the untimely arrival of the rain, then they must take it up privately with God during their evening prayers, but in the meantime they would be silent until Miss Walton had closed a classroom door behind them. Then, just after classes were finished for the afternoon and the girls had gone upstairs to comb their hair and wash their hands ready for tea, something had gone wrong with the doorknob on one of the dormitories and eight of the girls, trapped inside until Mr. Keeble, the elderly school porter, had creaked his way up there to release them before mending the knob, had screeched and giggled and rattled the door. Miss Thompson had dealt with the crisis by reading them a lecture on patience and decorum, though circumstances had forced her to speak in a voice that could be heard from within and therefore through much of the rest of the school too, including Claudia's office. It had not been the best of days, as Claudia had just been remarking without contradiction to Eleanor Thompson and Lila Walton over tea in her private sitting room a short while after the prisoners had been freed. She could do with far fewer such days. And yet now! Now, to cap everything off and make an already trying day more so, there was a marquess awaiting her pleasure in the visitors' parlor downstairs. A marquess, for the love of all that was wonderful! That was what the silver-edged visiting card she held between two fingers said—the Marquess of Attingsborough. The porter had just delivered it into her hands, looking sour and disapproving as he did so—a not unusual expression for him, especially when any male who was not a teacher invaded his domain. "A marquess," she said, looking up from the card to frown at her fellow teachers. "Whatever can he want? Did he say, Mr. Keeble?" "He did not say and I did not ask, miss," the porter replied. "But if you was to ask me, he is up to no good. He smiled at me." "Ha! A cardinal sin indeed," Claudia said dryly while Eleanor laughed. "Perhaps," Lila suggested, "he has a daughter he wishes to place at the school." "A marquess?" Claudia raised her eyebrows and Lila looked suitably quelled. "Perhaps, Claudia," Eleanor said, a twinkle in her eye, "he has two daughters." Claudia snorted and then sighed, took one more sip of her tea, and got reluctantly to her feet. "I suppose I had better go and see what he wants," she said. "It will be more productive than sitting here guessing. But of all things to happen today of all days. A marquess." Eleanor laughed again. "Poor man," she said. "I pity him." Claudia had never had much use for the aristocracy—idle, arrogant, cold-hearted, nasty—although the marriage of two of her teachers and closest friends to titled gentlemen had forced her to admit during the past few years that perhaps some of them might be agreeable

and even worthy individuals. But it did not amuse her to have one of their number, a stranger, intrude into her own world without a by-your-leave, especially at the end of a difficult day. She did not believe for a single moment that this marquess wished to place any daughter of his at her school. She preceded Mr. Keeble down the stairs since she did not wish to move at his slow pace. She ought, she supposed, to have gone into her bedchamber first to see that she was looking respectable, which she was quite possibly not doing after a hard day at school. She usually made sure that she presented a neat appearance to visitors. But she scorned to make such an effort for a marquess and risk appearing obsequious in her own eyes. By the time she opened the door into the visitors' parlor, she was bristling with a quite unjustified indignation. How dared he come here to disturb her on her own property, whatever his business might be. She looked down at the visiting card still in her hand. "The Marquess of Attingsborough?" she said in a voice not unlike the one she had used on Paula Hern earlier in the day, the one that said she was not going to be at all impressed by any pretension of grandeur. "At your service, ma'am. Miss Martin, I presume?" He was standing across the room, close to the window. He bowed elegantly. Claudia's indignation soared. One steady glance at him was not sufficient upon which to make any informed judgment of his character, of course, but really, if the man had any imperfection of form or feature or taste in apparel, it was by no means apparent. He was tall and broad of shoulder and chest and slim of waist and hips. His legs were long and well shaped. His hair was dark and thick and shining, his face handsome, his eyes and mouth good-humored. He was dressed with impeccable elegance but without a trace of ostentation. His Hessian boots alone were probably worth a fortune, and Claudia guessed that if she were to stand directly over them and look down, she would see her own face reflected in them and probably her flat, untidy hair and limp dress collar as well. She clasped her hands at her waist lest she test her theory by touching the collar points. She held his card pinched between one thumb and forefinger. "What may I do for you, sir?" she asked, deliberately avoiding calling him my lord, a ridiculous affectation, in her opinion. He smiled at her, and if perfection could be improved upon, it had just happened. He had good teeth. Claudia steeled herself to resist the charm she was sure he possessed in aces. "I come as a messenger, ma'am," he said, "from Lady Whitleaf." He reached into an inner pocket of his coat and withdrew a sealed paper. "From Susanna?" Claudia took one step farther into the room. Susanna Osbourne had been a teacher at the school until her marriage last year to Viscount Whitleaf. Claudia had always rejoiced at Susanna's good fortune in making both an eligible marriage and a love match and yet she still mourned her own loss of a dear friend and colleague and a good teacher. She had lost three such friends all in the same cause over the course of four years. Sometimes it was hard not to be selfishly depressed by it all. "When she knew I was coming to Bath to spend a few days with my mother and my father, who is taking the waters," the marquess said, "she asked me to call here and pay my respects to you. And she gave me this letter, perhaps to convince you that I am no impostor." His eyes smiled again as he came across the room and placed the letter in her hand. And as if at least his eyes could not have been mud-colored or something equally nondescript, she could see that they were a clear blue, almost like a summer sky. Susanna had asked him to come and pay his respects? Why? "Whitleaf is the cousin of a cousin of mine," the marquess explained. "Or an almost cousin of mine, anyway. It is complicated, as family relationships often are. Lauren Butler, Viscountess Ravensberg, is a cousin by virtue of the fact that her mother married my aunt's brother-in-law. We have been close since childhood. And Whitleaf is Lauren's first cousin. And so in a sense both he and his lady have a strong familial claim on me." If he was a marquess, Claudia thought with sudden suspicion, and his father was still alive, what did that make his father? But he was here at Susanna's behest and it behooved her to be a little better than just icily polite. "Thank you," she said, "for coming in person to deliver the letter. I am much obliged to you, sir. May I offer you a cup of tea?" She willed him to say no. "I will not put you to that trouble, ma'am," he said, smiling again. "I understand you are to leave for London in two days' time?" Ah. Susanna must have told him that. Mr. Hatchard, her man of business in London, had found employment for two of her senior girls, both charity pupils, but he had been unusually evasive about the identity of the prospective employers, even when she had asked quite specifically in her last letter to him. The paying girls at the school had families to look after their interests, of course. Claudia had appointed herself family to the rest and never released any girl who had no employment to which to go or any about whose expected employment she felt any strong misgiving. At Eleanor's suggestion, Claudia was going to go to London with Flora Bains and Edna Wood so that she could find out exactly where they were to be placed as governesses and to withdraw her consent if she was not satisfied. There were still a few weeks of the school year left, but Eleanor had assured her that she was perfectly willing and able to take charge of affairs during Claudia's absence, which would surely be no longer than a week or ten days. Claudia had agreed to

go, partly because there was another matter too upon which she wished to speak with Mr. Hatchard in person. "I am," she told the marquess. "Whitleaf intended to send a carriage for your convenience," the marquess told her, "but I was able to inform him that it would be quite unnecessary to put himself to the trouble." "Of course it would," Claudia agreed. "I have already hired a carriage." "I will see about unhiring it for you, if I may be permitted, ma'am," he said. "I plan to return to town on the same day and will be pleased to offer you the comfort of my own carriage and my protection for the journey." "Oh, goodness, heaven forbid!" "That will be quite unnecessary, sir," she said firmly. "I have already made the arrangements." "Hired carriages are notorious for their lack of springs and all other comforts," he said. "I beg you will reconsider." "Perhaps you do not fully understand, sir," she said. "I am to be accompanied by two schoolgirls on the journey." "Yes," he said, "so Lady Whitleaf informed me. Do they prattle? Or, worse, do they giggle? Very young ladies have an atrocious tendency to do both." "My girls are taught how to behave appropriately in company, Lord Attingsborough," she said stiffly. Too late she saw the twinkle in his eyes and understood that he had been joking. "I do not doubt it, ma'am," he said, "and feel quite confident in trusting your word. Allow me, if you will, to escort all three of you ladies to Lady Whitleaf's door. She will be vastly impressed with my gallantry and will be bound to spread the word among my family and friends." Now he was talking utter nonsense. But how could she decently refuse? She desperately searched around in her head for some irrefutable argument that would dissuade him. Nothing came to mind, however, that did not seem ungracious, even downright rude. But she would rather travel a thousand miles in a springless carriage than to London in his company. Why? Was she overawed by his title and magnificence? She bristled at the very idea. At his . . . maleness, then? She was uncomfortably aware that he possessed that in abundance. But how ridiculous that would be. He was simply a gentleman offering a courtesy to an aging spinster, who happened to be a friend of his almost-cousin's cousin's wifegoodness, it was a tenuous connection. But she held a letter from Susanna in her hand. Susanna obviously trusted him. An aging spinster? When it came to any consideration of age, she thought, there was probably not much difference between the two of them. Now there was a thought. Here was this man, obviously at the very pinnacle of his masculine appeal in his middle thirties, and then there was she. He was looking at her with raised eyebrows and smiling eyes. "Oh, very well," she said briskly. "But you may live to regret your offer." His smile broadened and it seemed to an indignant Claudia that there was no end to this man's appeal. As she had suspected, he had charm oozing from every pore and was therefore not to be trusted one inch farther than she could see him. She would keep a very careful eye upon her two girls during the journey to London. "I do hope not, ma'am," he said. "Shall we make an early start?" "It is what I intended," she told him. She added grudgingly, "Thank you, Lord Attingsborough. You are most kind." "It will be my pleasure, Miss Martin." He bowed deeply again. "May I ask a small favor in return? May I be given a tour of the school? I must confess that the idea of an institution that actually provides an education to girls fascinates me. Lady Whitleaf has spoken with enthusiasm about your establishment. She taught here, I understand." *Revue de presse* With her signature exquisite sense of characterization and subtle wit, Balogh brings her sweetly sensual, thoroughly romantic *Simply* quartet to a truly triumphant conclusion. *Booklist*